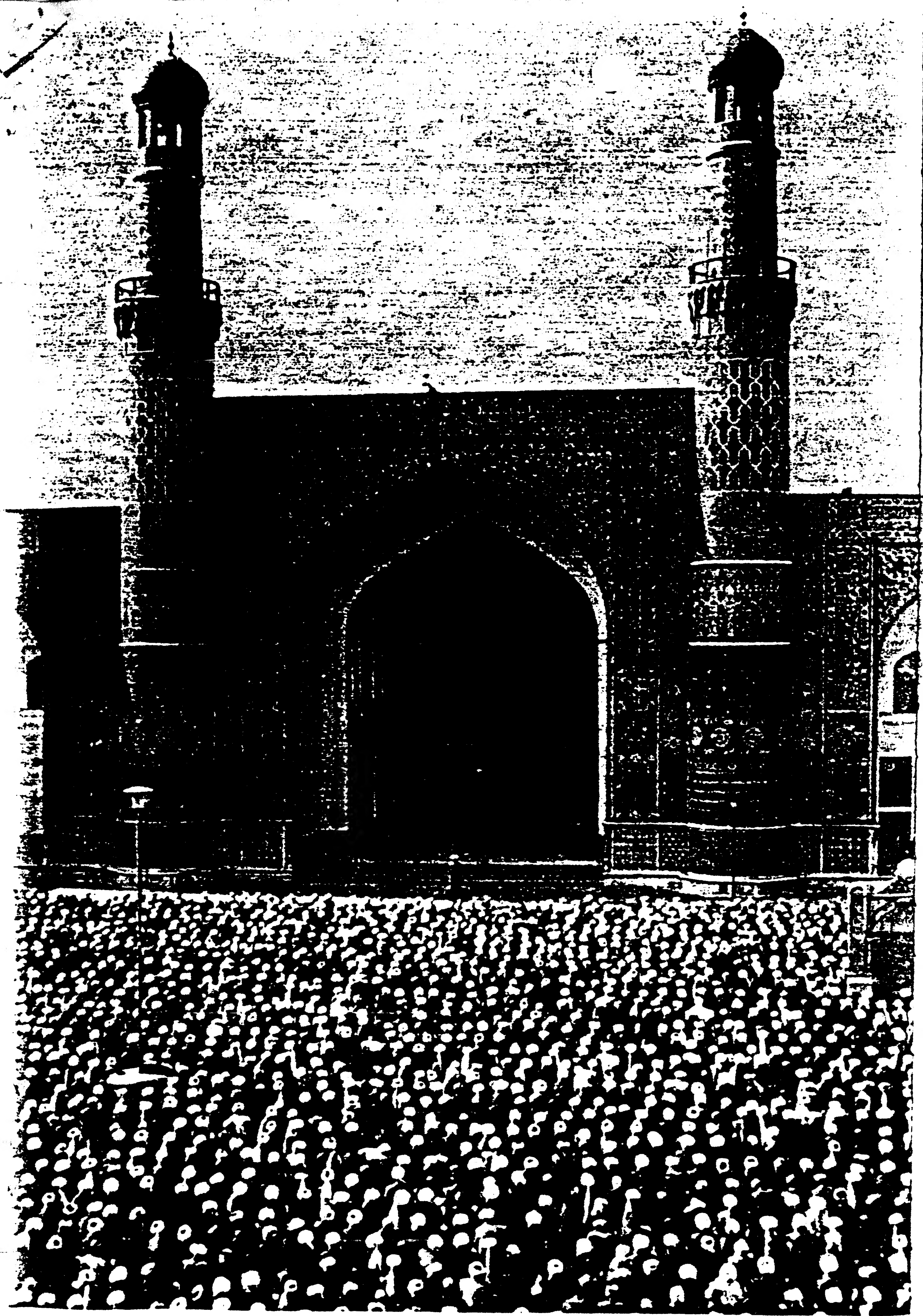


Masjed-i-Jamay in Herat




# THE AFGHAN REFUGEE FAMILY ABROAD: A FOCUS ON PAKISTAN

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The inviolability of the family is a cherished ideal defended by every Afghan. The war has produced confusion, forced readjustments and interrupted the routines of life in every major social institution and as perceptions of these affronts to the culture deepen, the more critical the traditional roles of the family become. As a consequence, the refugee experience has largely resulted in strengthening the concept of a three-generational family as a societal imperative. This satisfies the need for in-group solidarity commanded by emnity toward hostile outside forces.

As time passes, however, dislocations will become more disruptive and changes almost inevitably will occur as the refugees adjust to new situations, new pressures, and new challenges to Afghan culture in Pakistan and throughout the world. To assess the complexities of forces affecting families in exile, it is necessary to analyze the many variables in the total situation, but the absence of reliable data concerning the Afghan refugees makes it unfair to proffer meaningful projections at this time. I have argued repeatedly for the clear need for more reliable demographic information, more systematic, comprehensive collection of data for all aspects of the refugee situation. I do so again. Interdisciplinary studies are needed before continuity or change can be determined in the area of Afghan family values.

## CONCEPT OF FAMILY

Characteristically, the Afghan family is endogamous (with parallel or cross-cousins preferred), patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal, with tendencies toward respect for age, early marriage, possible polygamy, considerable matri-oriented economic and social input, reverence for motherhood, high fertility, high infant and maternal mortality, and low divorce. Rigorously honored ideals emphasizing family cohesiveness through extended kinship networks endow this institution with its primary function as a support system. The extended family, the major economic and social unit, performs a central role in Afghan culture because the absence of nation-wide government institutions and facilities require each individual to find his socio-economic and political rights and perform his obligations within the family (L. Dupree, 1980:181). Past governments have sought to institutionalize social reforms pertaining to the family for over one hundred years (N. Dupree, 1978; 1984a:306-312), but although a legal framework facilitating voluntary change was put in place, there was little qualitative transformation because no central government dared interfere directly with family prerogatives which were seen to be the provenance of Islam and therefore beyond the competence of secular law (Knabe, 1977:340).

Furthermore, in the code of Pushtunwali which determines social order and responsibility for the Pushtun who represent the largest ethnic group among the Afghan refugees in Pakistan (ca. 80-90%), zar (wealth), zan (women), and zamin

(land) are sacred to namuz (honor), the central idea of Pushtunwali. The defense of namuz, even unto death, is obligatory for every Pushtun. Since women are the arch symbols of honor, their control and protection is essential to upholding namuz. To die in defense of the family is highly honorable; to fail to do so is to live in shame.

These sentiments, strengthened by Islamic injunctions to respect women and defend the household, account in large part for the legendary ferocity with which Afghan males protect their families.

## DRA ENCROACHMENTS

The largely detribalized leadership of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan (DRA), alienated from traditional modes of honorable behavior, challenged all aspects of Pushtunwali. In attempting to nationalize land and wealth, as well as regulate marriage practices (Beattie, 1984:196-208; N. Dupree, 1984a:322-324; N. Tapper, 1984), the DRA was perceived as unlawfully interfering with Islamic norms and values and, most importantly, violating the social prescriptions in the code of Pushtunwali (Taniwal & Nuristani, 1985:40).

Many refugees choose to leave in order to avoid insults to the family. Rhetoric urging children to defy family restraints and inform on parents is repugnant, DRA encroachments on family decision-making concerning the conduct of female members are intolerable, and the establishment of institutions such as day-care centers and kindergartens which usurp the family's paramount role in child socialization jeopardizes the entire culture. Sending

thousands of very young children to the Soviet Union for a Communist-oriented education is regarded as a particularly barbarous weapon designed to break up the family through the replacement of stable traditional relationships with fragmented, individualized interactions.

Assaults on the family therefore appear to come from all sides. As a result, bonds preserving the integrity of the family are being tightened to confront the invasion of an alien ideology.

## RESPONSES

### The Exodus

Family solidarity begins from the time the traumatic decision to leave is reached. Villagers move out in groups. In the urban areas the family network is almost the only system upon which an individual can rely in times of crisis. Clandestine arrangements for the disposal of property and cross-border travel can only be made with the support of family units. Additionally, when the danger of imminent arrest is conveyed to a family (typically through family networks or from former students, the teacher/student and "class fellow" bonds being other forceful ties of loyalty), women will insist their menfolk leave them behind to wind up family affairs. One of the more wrenching emotional conflicts occurs, however, when elderly men and women refuse to leave. The sense of guilt in having abandoned a basic familial duty to provide for and protect one's parents haunts many in exile.

Much courage is displayed by individual families on behalf of kin-group safety during

the exodus, and in the first harsh days after arrival in Pakistan. Islamic precepts, coupled with customary codes respected by both the refugees and receiving Pakistanis, particularly spare women and children from abandonment, rape and other sexual and child abuses experienced by too many other refugee populations. Family values then continue to contribute to the resilience exhibited by the refugees countering the in roads of turbulance and instability within the unaccustomed refugee environment. Moreover, the flexibility of hierarchal responsibilities within the extended family structure minimizes many disruptive aspects of dislocation.

Extended families have reached out to embrace wider spheres of kin ties forming compact groups with a sense of new-found solidarity. The refugees typically arrive in kin-related groups, at times representing entire villages. At other times, small groups will establish themselves so that later arrivals may be assisted during the long hiatus without rations or services prior to the completion of lengthy registration procedures. Indeed, survival often depends on family cohesiveness, a vital sustaining power. This spirit of family responsibility accounts in good part for much of the multiple registrations which plague the refugee administration. Many unregistered families inelegible for rations refuse to leave kin-groups living in oversaturated areas where registration has closed, even though a move guarantees full assistance (N. Dupree, 1986).

## Settlement Patterns

The mud-brick housing in most areas consists

of clusters of residences belonging to kin groups. Many nuclear families build separate houses within these clusters. Others prefer to live as extended families behind high mud walls surrounding several individual units, mirroring architectural norms inside Afghanistan, in both rural and urban settings. These inward-oriented residences provide psychological as well as physical protection while the refugees are largely dependent on outsiders for survival.

Extended family households usually include the male head of family, his sons, brothers and/or cousins, their families and all unmarried and widowed females. Extended family households may contain anywhere from 2-9 nuclear family units each composed of an average of six persons. Nuclear households with as many as nine persons exist, however. Incomplete households in which the mother, father, or both, have been killed are found only occasionally (Boesen, 1983:49). Settlement patterns in the major refugee concentrations, therefore, indicate that displacement has not resulted in any major breakdown of the extended family.

## Male Role and Status Modifications

Exile has forced many male heads of families to modify ideals concerning role and status as they seek to eke out an uncertain existence as refugees. The need to submit to regulations imposed by outsiders and accept subsistence services from foreign agencies is a galling experience for it reduces their vaunted self-reliance and erodes their role as protector/provider which is inherent in the concept of male honor.

Additionally, probably 90% of the refugees

in Pakistan are from the rural areas. To till the land and be self-reliant in providing for a family is a matter of pride and honor for most Afghans. The Pushtun (94% in 1984: more recently, non-Pushtuns have been arriving in ever-increasing numbers) generally regard trade and service as less-than-desirable occupations. Yet the refugees are not allowed to own or farm land independently. Many have successfully revised, if temporarily, their views on respectable pursuits and have taken up new occupations in order to avert total dependency. Even those who were wage-earners in the past have been forced to make adjustments which are frequently less than economically or psychologically satisfying.

Job opportunities, as well as participation in the jihad (war of resistance) inside Afghanistan, often take men away from their homes. Therefore, although the male heads of families continue to function as the biological and economic producers, they must now remain away from their families. These changes are not easily accomplished without stress which often manifests itself in family discord. Not all have been able to make the transition. For them, idleness and a sense of lost purpose degenerate into a demoralizing predisposition toward dependency, severely damaging family relations.

Some reorientation of traditional relationships between elderly heads of families and younger members whose newly acquired expertise in the refugee milieu give them superior qualifications to deal with outsiders has been noted. The young thus overstep the traditional roles of their elders. Even so, respect for elders appears to be still deeply entrenched in most families. Many elders nevertheless recognize that changes in role and status within

family groups are inevitable.

## Pivotal Role of Women

Since so many external strains beset family relationships, women's role in creating a semblance of normalcy is indispensable in combatting psychological collapse within the family. Publicity accounts suffused with dejected stereotyped accounts of the worthlessness of refugee women imply the nonexistence of stable interfamilial male/female relations. These are overstated. Afghan women are expected to ensure continuity by functioning as the essential link between the past and the future, as the repositories and perpetuators of the culture. They are responsible for the enculturation and protection of the next generation. The role of motherhood, always revered, has been enhanced. Childbearing patterns seem to be changing as births among the refugee population exceed traditional birth rates: as one generation falls, the next, and the next, must be there to carry on the fight for freedom.

In addition to domestic duties, women are called upon to inspire men to fulfill their obligations, not only in providing the best possible material well-being, but by participating courageously in supporting the jihad. The derision women heap upon men who would shirk their duties can be devastating. This is particularly evident between mothers and sons, sisters and brothers, whose close emotional ties and influence characterizes most Afghan families. Pushtun women are famous for their poetic couplets known as landey which demand heroism of their menfolk, even though it

may result in death. The power of women to give energy and determination to the resistance is acknowledged and respected (Jamiat, 1986:3).

## Psychocultural Stresses and Strains on Women

Given the primacy of women in the family value system and their pivotal contributions to survival, it is imperative to address some of the anxieties which threaten to undermine their current fortitude and disrupt the rhythm of family life.

Numbers of observers have remarked on the assertiveness and spontaneity of Afghan refugee women. Closer contact, however, reveals several potentially erosive factors which highlight their vulnerability. These psychocultural strains are more disturbing to the family than the physical hardships which are borne with remarkably little complaint, underscoring the cultural ideal which calls for women to be hardworking and uncomplaining.

The refugees represent a wide spectrum of tribal and ethnic groups, each holding fundamentally similar value systems, even though customs may differ. Nevertheless, because settlement patterns frequently juxtapose large concentrations of non-related groups from diverse geographic areas within congested spaces, constraints on women tend to be more rigidly imposed than they were in the village of Afghanistan (L. & N. Dupree, 1976). Refugee women living in urban areas are also more confined (N. Dupree, 1984b:16).

This is an expected response, for Muslim societies throughout history have traditionally responded with greater protectiveness of women when faced with threats to their culture. Also,

the more politically and economically insecure men become, the more they tend to denounce extra-domestic activities for women. Most importantly, many women become more inclined to conform to traditional ideals governing their behavior when crises threaten. For them, stricter seclusion provides both physical and psychological shelter. Because of restraints on mobility and access to work opportunities, both rural and urban women in the refugee population in Pakistan are experiencing a process or marginalization and domestication, which is potentially disruptive for male/female relations and family stability. Considerable mutual dependence between males and females existed in pre-exodus Afghanistan (Hunte, 1984). The acknowledged socio-economic contributions by women, both rural and urban, were clearly interactional and established a bond of partnership expressed through mutual respect. Ennui can become worrisome when such outlets are withdrawn and no alternatives provided. Fortunately this problem is being addressed by some refugee assistance programs (N. Dupree, 1985a & b).

The refugee situation imposes additional hardships. Strained relationships may exist between wives and mothers-in-law, brothers-in-law, or co-wives. Under normal circumstances these tensions may be merely regrettable reflections of petty frictions over competition for recognition, struggles for status enhancement or incompatible personality clashes. Unaccustomed physical closeness in exile exacerbates all such negative interactions.

Widows find it particularly difficult to keep personal relationships from slowly disintegrating. Widowhood is often compounded by multiple losses of husbands, sons, grandsons,

brothers, fathers, and cousins. Hardly a single family has been spared, and many have been suddenly deprived of three generations of male providers. Because of Afghan concepts of family responsibility, widows are customarily accorded security. Psychologically they bear their grief with dignity, taking comfort in the knowledge that their menfolk fell honorably fighting in the jihad shahidivan (martyrs). However, many of the general conditions affecting all women are most adversely felt by widows.

The vulnerability of widows too young to have established a commanding status in the family hierarchy seems to be being addressed more frequently than in pre-exodus Afghanistan by the institution of the leverite, in which a widow is married, with or without her consent, to a member of her deceased husband's family, preferably a brother, even though he may be years younger. Although the leverite, a pre-Islamic custom, is explicitly forbidden in the Koran (Sura 4:19), its traditional function in stablizing family identification, political alignments and economic viability has become even more critical during the refugee crisis.

Whether the current crisis is leading to the encouragement of polygamy remains to be studied. The need to protect widows and provide for a surplus of unmarried women created by the war which is disrupting normal marriage patterns may, over the long run, place an intolerable burden on the capacity of extended families to fulfill their traditional obligations (Boesen, 1983:58).

Additionally, the war has wounded and maimed many women. Too often young paraplegic wives have been replaced by second wives, and their prospects for readjustment are unknown. Dramatic changes within the family, for better or worse, may also result from the exploits of

male members in the war arena where political fortunes rise and fall rapidly. The status of a wife depends to a considerable degree on the status of her family in the local power structure (for instance, N. & R. Tapper, 1982).

These are just a few of the numerous dimensions which breed neuroses and subject women to periods of depression. Recent reporting on the health situation records a disturbing increase in emotionally disturbed patients (IRC, 1985:4). Separation from family members remaining inside Afghanistan is cited as a major cause of these stress-related ailments. When psychological disorders do strike women, the attacks are most often explained in terms of possession by jinn (spirits, from the Arabic jinoon meaning madness), a time-honored and acceptable form of release from grievances (N. Tapper, 1980:75; Hunte, 1984). Possessed women are thereby absolved from responsibility for their actions and family stability is maintained. However, normal pre-exodus methods of exorcising jinn and restoring a sense of importance to those feeling rejected, such as visits to shrines (L. Dupree, 1976) and family-reenforcing celebrations, are not readily available in the refugee situation. This has contributed to instability in a number of refugee families.

## Crises Among the Youth

Prolonged absence of men imposes massive hardships on women and tends to redefine roles and responsibilities. The upbringing of children is of particular concern. Women deplore the difficulties of rearing children without paternal authority, especially in

situations where the young are exposed to influences outside the experience of women. Effective communication is consequently impaired and the women find it extremely difficult to exercise control. Traditionally, most rural boys would be occupied in learning to farm and herd, but now they seek any activities, no matter how inappropriate, to fill idle time provided by less than adequate education and vocational training (Boesen, 1983:57).

The disruption of traditional routines, minimal opportunities for participation in personal decision-making, and uncertainties clouding hopes for the future are particularly harrowing for adolescent boys from urban areas, many of whom arrive without their families after escaping to avoid compulsory military service or arrest. Most gravitate to urban centers such as Islamabad and Karachi where lack of language and employment skills restricts them to lives of idleness and frustration. They are further burdened by hostile treatment from local populations who expect antisocial behavior from these unattached young males and consequently regard them as threats to society.

Neither the economic nor the emotional needs of the youth are given much attention by the refugee authorities because they live outside official registration procedures for the most part. It is they, however, who comprise perhaps the most vulnerable component of the refugee population and the disintegration of family unity is most critically apparent among these groups.

The older generation can more willingly work out compromises, but the young are easily disorganized and find it difficult to establish a moral equilibrium when experiences encourage them to behave more freely as individuals undeterred by parental restraints and models.

Many boys aspire to join the jihad, but disturbing patterns such as those discussed above seem to be emerging.

## Third Country Settlers

Educated middle class families living in Pakistan's urban areas are even more adversely plagued by the stresses discussed above (Farr, 1984). The women in these families had participated most fully in pre-exodus movements toward education and extra-domestic career opportunities for women (Ministry of Information and Culture, 1977; N. Dupree, 1984a:309). They had also been most affected by conflict between the desire for personal decision-making and adherence to traditional dictates of family consensus (Knabe, 1977). The resurgence of fundamentalist attitudes toward women among the refugee population has placed these women in totally dependent positions. They simply cannot survive in Pakistan outside the family and must accept familial control. The conflicts are thereby exacerbated (N. Dupree, 1984b:16).

Wherever possible, therefore, these families leave Pakistan for Europe, the United States, Australia, and other parts of the world. Typically, groups with common origins and languages gather together and kinship networks continue to play a significant role. The family support system continues to function effectively.

Resettlement nevertheless precipitates major changes, particularly in the sex-related roles of individuals within families, many of which become acutely stressful. Men find it difficult to pursue careers commensurate with past endeavors; many prefer to remain idle rather

than accept entry-level positions. This places an unfair burden on many women who find themselves the sole providers for several generations of males. On the other hand, previously house-bound women are not restrained by the need to find status occupations and they enjoy the new experience of being financially independent.

Such new situations allow many women gradually to pursue their own interests and lessen their identification with the extended family. These altered perceptions of roles, however, can bring about a deterioration in many male/female interactions leading to severe marital disruptions, family instability, and divorce. Children brought to third countries react in a variety of ways as they attempt to adapt to foreign cultures in which their traditional values appear no longer appropriate. These range from total rejection to an unrealistic idealization of their own culture. These adjustments are particularly difficult for adolescents already struggling with identity problems. The establishment of standards of behavior for the young in these homes creates conflicts which sorely test family unity. This is a world-wide refugee problem which needs urgent attention (Refugees, 1986).

How individual Afghan families and Afghan communities in general respond to these stresses deserves special study which would be of immense value in understanding the subject of refugee resettlement and integration in general.

## CONCLUSION

Afghan family cohesiveness still functions as the single most powerful sustaining force

among Afghan refugees, and the family institution appears not to have experienced serious disintegration in spite of numerous stressful assaults. This indicates that the Afghan family value system is flexible enough to adapt to changing requirements, and, inshallah, will survive the vicissitudes of the present crisis.

There are some who would argue that many aspects of the traditional Afghan concept of family are too restrictive to permit "modernization". If one sheds Western precepts, it may be argued, however, that Afghan family values are not inimical to the establishment of a viable nation-state, particularly during the post-war period when centralized government services will be largely non-existent. It is then that the traditional function of the family as a support system will be most needed. Furthermore, as the forces of change vie with those of continuity, and the competition between tradition and modernity intensifies, any new regime would be well-advised to resolve conflicts by strengthening, not weakening, the family structure. Even if modified by the gradual weakening of the extended family and the subsequent rise in importance of nuclear families, the solidarity of family relationships should remain strong.

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بار کج به منزل نمی رسد.

"A tilted load won't reach its destination."

Meaning: Honesty is the best policy.

Persian proverb